

COCKTAILS *with a* CURATOR

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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NEW YORK



GIOVANNI BELLINI

St. Francis in the Desert

CA. 1476–78

Manhattan

2 OZ. BOURBON

¾ OZ. SWEET RED VERMOUTH

DASH OF ANGOSTURA BITTERS

Serve chilled in a cocktail glass and garnish with a maraschino cherry

A Manhattan, one of my favorite drinks, celebrates the island of Manhattan and the city of New York. The treasures of The Frick Collection are among the highlights of this wondrous city.

Since 1915, when Henry Clay Frick acquired this extraordinary painting from a private collection in England, it has hung on the same wall at the Frick—in the Living Hall, at the heart of the museum, with portraits by Titian on either side. *St. Francis in the Desert* is a rather mysterious masterpiece. We do not know for whom it was painted or why. We do not know its exact date. And, although many theories have been put forward, we do not know what it represents.

The painting was first referenced in 1525, when Marcantonio Michiel wrote a description of various private collections in Venice. Michiel cited the *St. Francis in the Desert* as being in the house of Taddeo Contarini, near the church of Santa Fosca. According to him, the canvas was painted not for Contarini but for Zuan Michiel, a Venetian of whom we know little. We do not know why Zuan Michiel commissioned the painting. Was this a private devotional work, an altarpiece for a private chapel, or was it for a church in Venice? One theory has it that Michiel intended the painting for San Francesco del Deserto, a Franciscan monastery on a small island in the Venetian lagoon—to this day a very secluded place. If it was meant for, and installed in, that church, it did not stay there for long, because by 1525 the picture was in the collection of Contarini.

St. Francis was born in 1182 in the town of Assisi, in central Italy, where he died in 1226. Francis was the son of a prominent merchant from Assisi who had a lot of business with France; hence his name—in Italian, Francesco—which derives from the word *Francia*. After a vision in the church of San Damiano in Assisi, Francis renounced his family's wealth for a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He created his own religious order, which was approved by the pope during his lifetime and named the Franciscan Order after him.

In 1224, Francis went to the mountain retreat of La Verna, a desolate location in the Apennines, the mountains in the Tuscan province of Arezzo. While meditating and praying there, Francis received a miraculous vision that bestowed on him the wounds Christ had received during his Passion, thereby sharing his suffering with Christ. This scene was often depicted in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but Bellini (1424/35–1516) represented it in a very different way. With his hands open and his arms outstretched, Francis stands in a rocky area that reminds us of La Verna. On the right, you can see the cave in which Francis presumably lived, with a lectern, a skull, a cross. On the left is a beautiful landscape, very different from the rugged landscape of La Verna. The vision that Francis is experiencing is in his own mind. Divine light comes through the laurel tree at the top left, but apart from that, we neither see nor experience what Francis is feeling. This painting is very much about the power of light; at the same time, it is about the role of man in nature.

Francis has left his clogs to one side, next to a small fig tree and some small flowers. Everything about the painting is about spring, about the flowering and the budding of trees. You can also see some human habitation: in the background is a town—a walled, medieval town of the type that still exists in the Veneto. Above that, in the mountains against a beautiful sky, is a fortress. You can almost feel the wind and the rustling through the trees, trees that are coming back to life after the harsh winter. There are just a few signs of human life—a shepherd bringing his flock along a river, next to the city,

far away from Francis. Several animals are among the beautiful details: the donkey, standing alone in a meadow; the gray heron, looking into the distance from this rocky outcrop; and to the side of Francis, just under his right arm, a rabbit coming out of a crevice in the rocks. My favorite detail, in the left-hand corner and rather difficult to make out, is a little kingfisher drinking water from a small waterfall. On a small trompe l'oeil piece of paper—a *cartellino* in Italian—in the lower left corner of the panel, which was probably painted in the mid-1470s, Bellini proudly signed the picture.

Francis was a saint, a thinker, and a philosopher. To this day one of the great heroes of the natural world, he believed nature was a creation of God. In many ways, the painting reflects his beautiful poem *The Canticle of Creatures,* in which he writes not only about his Christian beliefs but also about the sun, the moon, the stars, the air, the water, the various components of the earth, the flowers, the animals. He writes about life and death, and he considers our central role as stewards of this planet. One of the many things this painting does is inspire us to think about who we are and how we inhabit the earth. Hopefully, it can teach us all something about how to take better care of the world around us.

—X.S.



REMBRANDT HARMENSZ. VAN RIJN
The Polish Rider

CA. 1655

Szarlotka

POLISH BISON GRASS VODKA

UNFILTERED APPLE JUICE

Serve on the rocks in a tumbler and garnish with a pinch of cinnamon

Szarlotka *is Polish for "apple pie," but it also refers to this simple drink with just two essential ingredients. One is a type of Polish vodka that has bison grass in it. The only surviving European bison live in Białowieża, the last primeval forest in Europe, on the border between Poland and Belarus. You also have to use freshly pressed apple juice.*

Rembrandt's haunting *The Polish Rider* was described by the great British art historian Kenneth Clark as "one of the great poems" of painting. Set in an indeterminate landscape at an indeterminate time of day is a young man on horseback. Behind him is a series of buildings, a town; there is a domed building at the top of the hill. There is a tower below; a body of water, maybe a river or

lake; a little group of figures you can barely make out near a fire in the very far distance. The man is resolutely riding across the painting, across the landscape toward the right. As he does so, he pauses, looking not quite back but past us, out of the frame, in a very puzzling way.

The hat and jacket—a *żupan*—worn by the rider are typical of seventeenth-century Polish clothing. He is armed with a bow and arrow, of a design influenced by Eastern prototypes that was used in Poland in the period. On each side, he has a saber of a type known in Polish as a *karabela*. In his right hand, he holds a *nadziak*, also known as a horseman's pick or war hammer, a weapon used by the Polish military.

Rembrandt (1606–1669) probably painted this about 1655–56. By the 1650s, he was well known in Amsterdam, a wealthy artist with a large workshop and a grand house. He is known to have collected costumes, weapons, shells, and various exotic objects. He was not, however, very good at managing his money, and in 1656, he went bankrupt. His house was sold, and everything in it went to auction. It was around this time, just before or after, that *The Polish Rider* was painted. I think some of the doubt expressed by the figure in the painting may somehow reflect Rembrandt's own situation in those years.

We do not know for whom Rembrandt painted the picture or what he meant for it to represent. The Polish connection started in 1791, when a Polish aristocrat, Michał Kazimierz Ogiński, traveled to the Netherlands, brought back with him *The Polish Rider*, and then offered it for sale to the last king of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski. The king had invited to his court a number of foreign artists—among them, Marcello Bacciarelli from Rome and Bernardo Bellotto from Venice—and started to create an important art collection in Warsaw at the Royal Castle and his other residences. He was also a great collector of plants and orange trees. Ogiński offered the painting, curiously, in exchange for orange trees, because he was building a country house outside Warsaw at that time.

Stanisław August displayed *The Polish Rider*—together with other paintings in his collection, including other Rembrandts—at his favorite residence, the Łazienki Palace on the outskirts of Warsaw. Enlarged and decorated by him, the palace is in the middle of a lake, connected to the land by bridges. Stanisław kept *The Polish Rider* in the anteroom to his private apartments on the upper floor of the house, very close to his study and his bedroom. The painting remained there for four years. These were very turbulent times for Poland, and in 1795, Poland effectively ceased to exist. It was partitioned among Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The king abdicated and moved to Russia, where he died three years later, in 1798. The Rembrandt remained in the house, but it was then sold to another family. In her diaries, Waleria Tarnowska described the painting in 1811, when

she saw it at the Łazienki Palace and fell in love with it. Her father eventually purchased the painting. When he died, it passed on to Waleria and her husband, Jan Feliks Tarnowski. The Tarnowski family kept the painting for four generations at Dzików, their ancestral home in Galicia, in southeastern Poland.

Waleria's great-grandson, Zdzisław Tarnowski, sold the painting in 1910 to Henry Clay Frick, who bought it on the advice of the art historian and critic Roger Fry. Tarnowski sold it because at that point the area of Galicia was under Austrian rule, and many Polish aristocrats were heroically trying to buy back land from the Austrians to keep as much Polish land as they could in Polish hands. With the two world wars, much of this land would be lost to them, but it is interesting to think that *The Polish Rider*, so deeply connected to Poland and to the image of a new nation that did not exist at that time, actually was in Poland through a century when Poland did not exist on the map.

Who is this man riding across this mysterious landscape? Is this a portrait of someone? A Polish man? If so, the format would be somewhat strange. Is it meant to represent a specific historical character? A specific biblical episode? The names of King David and Nimrod have been put forward, among many others. Is he a theatrical figure? Is he related to certain plays that were being performed in Amsterdam in the 1650s and that Rembrandt may have responded to? It has even been argued that the rider is not actually a man but a woman dressed as a man. And did Rembrandt even think of it as a specific figure? Is this just a fancy picture? Is this just showing a beautiful youth dressed in an exotic outfit going forward toward the unknown? Many theories have been proposed.

What I love about this picture is the sense of mystery and of facing the unknown. I often feel like *The Polish Rider*, going forward and yet looking back, stopping and pausing and puzzling as to what the future holds. Julius Held wrote a beautiful article on this painting in 1944, toward the end of World War II. He was thinking about this picture at a time of great changes and great tragedy in human history. One of the things that Held writes about this painting is a description of it, an ideal description: "the shining youth who himself seems to be in search of something distant, unmindful of things close and familiar, still withholds from us, like another Lohengrin, the secret of his name."

—X.S.

ANTHONY VAN DYCK

Sir John Suckling

CA. 1638

Pink Gin

DRY GIN

A COUPLE DROPS OF ANGOSTURA BITTERS

Serve on the rocks in a cocktail glass

Invented in the late eighteenth century in the Royal Navy, this drink owes its creation to bitters being considered medicinal and useful against all sorts of illnesses. To make the bitters palatable, why not add gin? A popular drink in Malaysia, it is also known as Gin Pahit, pahit *being the Malay word for "bitter." Pink Gin appears in a number of short stories by William Somerset Maugham, many of which are set in Malaysia.*

Born in Antwerp in 1599, Anthony van Dyck traveled to England as a young man and later to Italy, where he lived in Genoa for many years. He traveled to Sicily between 1624 and 1625, just as the plague hit, at which point the island was quarantined and Van Dyck was not able to leave for more than a year. Quarantines were very much a reality of that time; it was probably the plague that



took Van Dyck's life in 1641. He left Sicily unscathed in 1625 and in 1632 moved to England, where he became well known for his portraits of courtiers and aristocrats at the court of King Charles I, the portrait of Sir John Suckling being one of them.

Van Dyck painted *Sir John Suckling* about 1638, toward the end of the artist's life. A wealthy English aristocrat, Suckling owned land in Suffolk, Lincolnshire, and Middlesex. His father had been Secretary of State and was in the Privy Council, and his uncle was Lord Treasurer. After studying at Cambridge, he fought in the army in Germany, in the Low Countries, and on the Scottish border. He traveled extensively and visited the continent. Suckling was described by John Aubrey in his *Brief Lives* as being "of middle stature and slight strength, brisk 'round the eye, reddish faced and red nose, ill liver. His head not very big, his hair a kind of sand color, his beard turned up naturally, so that he had a brisk and graceful look." The description corresponds to what we see in the Van Dyck portrait. Suckling was a notorious philanderer, as well as a gambler and lavish spender. He was also a published poet who wrote poems such as "I Prithee, Send Me Back My Heart" and "Why So Pale and Wan, Fond Lover?" In 1638, at the time when he was sitting for this portrait, his play *Aglaura*, which is set in Persia, was first performed in London. The portrait is likely related to this theatrical success.

Suckling is set among strange rock formations that give way to a beautiful landscape of mountains, a few shrubs, trees, and plants. His attire—an indigo tunic, covered with a red mantle, along with his unusual boots—is not like anything he would have worn at court and is no doubt associated with the theater, probably his play *Aglaura*. We know the costumes for the play, which Suckling paid for, were costly and glamorous and of a style associated with Arcadia, the mythical land in Greece linked to poetry and solitude. Many poets at the court of Charles I refer to this Arcadian idea. The portrait includes a Latin inscription on the rock, which reads NE TE QUÆSIVERIS EXTRA (Do not look outside yourself).

In the 1630s, Van Dyck painted at least two other portraits of English aristocrats in a similar fashion. The earliest of the three represents Philip Baron Wharton (National Gallery of Art, Washington) and was painted in 1632. In an Arcadian costume, he stands against a rocky background and holds a *houlette*, or a shepherd's crook, an instrument that was a typical attribute of shepherds at the time. The third of these portraits (National Portrait Gallery, London) shows George Stuart, the Seigneur d'Aubigny, who was depicted about 1638, at the same time as John Suckling. D'Aubigny, the brother of the Duke of Richmond, was also an admirer of poetry. He is set in a landscape with a little waterfall, roses, and rocks. There is also an inscription on the rock—ME FIRMIOR AMOR

(Love is stronger than I am)—which probably refers to his recent secret marriage to the daughter of the Earl of Suffolk.

In composition, the three portraits are very similar. Here are three gentlemen of the 1630s, all with a love of poetry, all involved in the theater, all wearing costumes understood at the time to refer to contemporaneous ideas. But there is a significant difference among them: Suckling is the only one holding a book. The volume is identifiable because even though the writing on it is just sketched in and you cannot read the lettering on the pages, there is a piece of paper projecting out of the book that has on it the name "Shakespeare," and at the top of the page it says "Hamlet." This is, as far as we know, the very first painted depiction of Shakespeare's First Folio. The volume was published in 1623 in London and includes, for the first time, all of Shakespeare's plays—the fourteen comedies, the twelve tragedies, and the ten history plays—except *Edward III*. It is telling that Suckling, a poet and playwright himself, holds the works of Shakespeare and especially that he shows them open to *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. It is extraordinary for an aristocrat to have asked to be portrayed with what was presumably his favorite play. It is equally remarkable that this is the very first time we see this great masterpiece of literature appearing in visual art. This portrait combines the art of Van Dyck, his great portrait skills, with the idea of literature and poetry and their importance at the time.

These three men found themselves on different sides in the early 1640s during the English Civil War. Wharton joined the Parliamentary forces against the king, and he fought in several battles. He survived the war, but with the Restoration, he had to flee the country and went into exile. Stuart and Suckling joined the royal party, and they both fought for the king. Stuart died at the Battle of Edgehill, at age twenty-four. Part of a plot to bring the king back into power, Suckling was tried for high treason in 1641. He fled the country for France, where he was separated from all his connections and in debt. His sad ending is recounted by John Aubrey: "Being come to the bottom of his funds, reflecting on the miserable and despicable condition he was reduced to, he took poison." He committed suicide, at age thirty-three, in Paris. These wonderful portraits present the very tragic story of these youths who died fighting or defending the king, people whose lives were heavily transformed by the English Civil War.

—X.S.